

Can Africa Feed Itself? A Presidential Commitment to Transforming African Food Systems



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Introduction

For decades, the question of whether Africa can achieve food self-sufficiency has loomed large. With a rapidly expanding population, shifting climate patterns, and numerous agricultural challenges, food security in Africa remains a critical concern. Nevertheless, amid these daunting challenges, there is a prevailing sense of hope and unwavering determination.

Arable Land and Population

Africa boasts vast expanses of arable land, estimated at around 600 million hectares, yet only a fraction of this potential is currently under cultivation. The continent's population, exceeding 1.3 billion, is projected to double by 2050. This demographic surge places substantial pressure on Africa's capacity to efficiently and sustainably harness its arable land to feed this growing populace.

Cultivated vs. Uncultivated Land

At present, a mere 10-20% of Africa's arable land is in active cultivation, leaving a substantial portion untapped. This situation presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is imperative to intensify efforts aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity and bringing more land into cultivation to achieve food security.

Challenges in Agriculture

The specter of climate change poses a formidable threat to agriculture, causing erratic weather patterns that adversely affect crop yields and food production. Furthermore, the absence of adequate infrastructure, limited access to modern farming techniques, and significant post-harvest losses all contribute to food insecurity.

Efforts and Debates

To tackle these multifaceted challenges, African leaders and international partners are actively engaging in debates and initiatives aimed at transforming the continent's food systems. Paramount among these discussions are sustainable agricultural practices, strategies for climate-resilient farming, increased investments in agriculture, and empowerment of smallholder farmers.

Commitments and Initiatives

Events such as the African Food Systems Forum witness significant commitments, including increased agricultural investment, advocacy for climate-resilient practices, reduction of post-harvest losses, facilitation of trade and regional integration, and the empowerment of youth and women in agriculture.

The Presidential Summit at African Food Systems Forum: A Pledge for Transformation

On September 7th, during the African Food Systems Forum, a Presidential Summit convened leaders from across the continent, united in their commitment to transform Africa's food systems. In this article, I will highlight some of the key commitments made by African leaders to ensure a sustainable and food-secure future for the continent, as declared during the African Food Systems Forum 2023. The event was meticulously designed to foster in-depth dialogues and solidify commitments, all aimed at propelling Africa's food systems to unprecedented levels of development. It served as a catalyst, igniting discussions that framed Africa's stance on food systems, strengthening partnerships among nations, and giving rise to actionable plans and enduring legacy programs. The 2023 Africa Food Systems Summit drew distinguished leaders, each contributing unique perspectives and displaying unwavering dedication to the cause.



A photograph of the Heads of State during the AFS Forum 2023

Photo credit: AGRF Secretariat

H.E. Dr. William Samoei Ruto, the President of the Republic of Kenya, fervently emphasized the vital role of the younger generation in ensuring the sustainability of agriculture. He stressed that their active participation, characterized by infusing vitality and innovation into the sector, is paramount. President Ruto further underlined the importance of adopting new technology and increased mechanization as essential strategies for realizing this vision.

Moreover, President Ruto made a compelling case for the youth's active engagement and empowerment, emphasizing their pivotal role in driving the necessary transformation within Africa's food systems. His belief in African nations' potential extends beyond achieving self-sufficiency in food production; he also envisions the export of surpluses. Additionally, the President highlighted the vast untapped agricultural spaces across the continent, emphasizing the imperative for African countries to collaborate and effectively leverage their abundant resources. His visionary perspective underscores the collective strength and potential for a prosperous agricultural future in Africa.



H.E. Dr. William S. Ruto delivering keynote remarks at the Presidential Summit hosted in Dar es Salaam.

H.E. Samia Suluhu Hassan, the President of the United Republic of Tanzania, stood firmly alongside her fellow leaders as a resolute advocate for Africa's potential as a global food provider. She emphatically declared, "As leaders of Africa, we stand prepared and fully committed to feeding the entire world," echoing the collective determination of the continent to provide sustenance to the global population. President Suluhu emphasized that Africa's food security also depends on the continent's ability to provide financial support to its farmers. She stressed that access to affordable credit will ensure that farmers can increase their production.



H.E. Samia Suluhu Hassan delivering keynote remarks during the Presidential Summit held in Dar es Salaam.

From the Republic of Burundi, H.E. President Evariste Ndayishimiye brought a vision of agricultural and breeding technologies that are reversing the rural-urban divide. In his compelling address, he revealed a phenomenon previously unseen in his country, where young people are departing urban centers to embark on expansive pastoral projects in rural areas.

Key Commitments Made at the Presidential Summit:

1. **Investing in Agriculture:** African leaders pledged to increase investments in agriculture, allocating a larger share of national budgets to this sector and attracting private sector investments. Adequate funding is essential to modernize farming practices, improve infrastructure, and enhance research and development.
2. **Climate-Resilient Agriculture:** Recognizing the impact of climate change on agriculture, leaders committed to promoting climate-resilient agricultural practices. This includes the adoption of drought-resistant crop varieties, improved water management, and sustainable land use practices.
3. **Support for Smallholder Farmers:** Smallholder farmers are the backbone of African agriculture. Leaders pledged to provide support to these farmers, including access to credit, modern farming technologies, and training. Empowering smallholder farmers is crucial for increasing food production and reducing poverty.
4. **Reducing Post-Harvest Losses:** Efforts to reduce post-harvest losses were emphasized, focusing on improved storage and transportation infrastructure, as well as better market access, to minimize these losses and ensure that more food reaches consumers.
5. **Enhancing Trade and Regional Integration:** African leaders recognized the importance of regional trade in ensuring food security. They committed to removing trade barriers and improving trade infrastructure to facilitate the movement of agricultural products across borders.

6. **Promoting Sustainable Food Systems:** The summit highlighted the need to promote sustainable food systems that are both environmentally friendly and nutritionally balanced. Leaders committed to reducing food waste and promoting healthy diets.
7. **Youth and Women Empowerment:** African leaders acknowledged the vital role of youth and women in agriculture. They pledged to create opportunities for youth and women in the agricultural sector, including access to land and resources.

In conclusion

The question of whether Africa can feed itself is a complex one, but the commitment shown by African leaders at the Presidential Summit during the 2023 African Food Systems Forum is a positive step in the right direction, signalling that the continent is awakening to its potential. Transforming African food systems requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the challenges of climate change, infrastructure, post-harvest losses, and more. It also demands increased investments, improved agricultural practices, and greater support for smallholder farmers, youth, and women. While challenges remain, the determination of African leaders to prioritize food security and sustainable agriculture is a source of hope. The path forward involves not only government-led initiatives but also collaboration with the private sector, civil society, and international partners. By working together and implementing the commitments made at the African Food Systems Forum Presidential Summit, Africa can move closer to the goal of feeding itself and ensuring a prosperous future for its people.